UPDATE

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Group set to launch new gay rights drive

By **Louis Aguilar**
Gazette Telegraph

DENVER — An ambitious and influential group formed to fight Amendment 2 is on the verge of launching a statewide gay rights campaign that could include a future ballot initiative to protect gays from discrimination.

Denver-based Colorado Alliance to Restore Equality hopes to mount an education and political campaign around the state to ensure that the rights of gays are protected, officials said Wednesday.

The 70-member group includes Denver business, political, religious and civic leaders along with leaders of the gay community, but organizers want to expand it throughout the state. Among those involved are Denver City Councilwoman Cathy Reynolds, several high-ranking officials from Mayor Wellington Webb's office, Rabbi Steven Foster, convention officials and business leaders.

"We want to be the most broad-based coalition that exists to fight the many damaging effects of the amendment," said alliance president Linda Fowler, who also is a plaintiff in the lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of Amendment 2.

The amendment, approved by Colorado voters in November, would ban laws that protect gays from discrimination based on their sexual orientation.

The alliance grew out of efforts begun in December by the Greater Denver Chamber of Commerce to fight the amendment. Last week, the group opened an office in Denver. At a meeting Wednesday, organizers discussed plans, including:

- Conduct an $85,000 study on voter attitudes toward gay rights.
- Find people around the state willing to form local chapters by June 21 so they can hold education programs this fall.
- Be able to throw support behind or against any initiative related to gay rights or Amendment 2. It may also try to sponsor a ballot initiative that would provide gays protection from discrimination.

Fowler said the group wants to shift the focus of the debate away from a Colorado boycott and toward the broader issue of gay rights. The group has yet to take an official stand on the boycott.

A similar effort was tried in Colorado Springs. Attorney Greg Walta tried to build a coalition to get an alternative amendment on this November's ballot. It failed because of a lack of statewide support.

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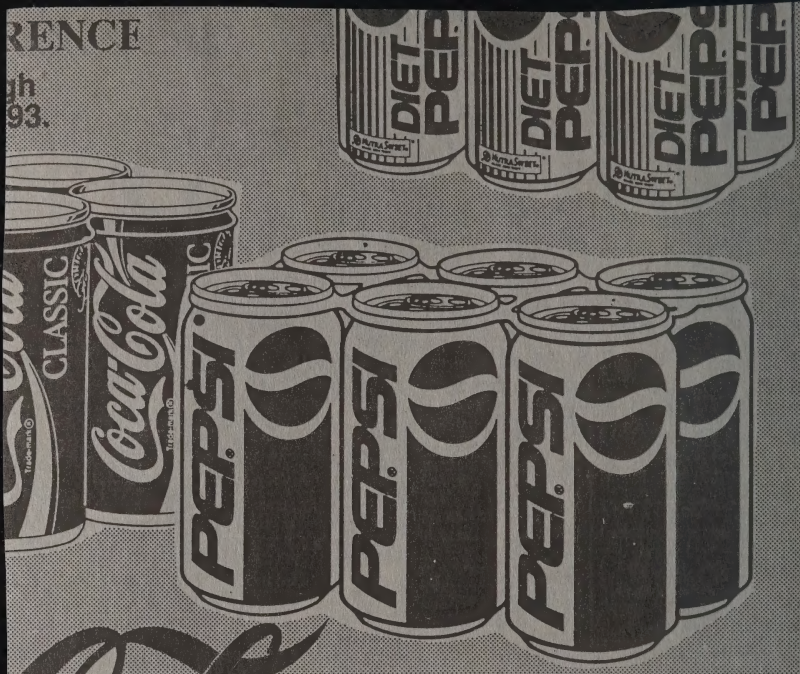

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